

Punjabi leaders, academics fail language of the people

By Shafqat Tanvir Mirza

So far as Punjabi political leaders are concerned, they are illiterate in terms of Punjabi or Seraiki language because they are not taught in their mother tongue at any level. Most of them are not from the class of the common people: they are feudal, traders, industrialists plus professionals and they include Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain of the Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid, Sharifs and Javed Hashmi of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, Imran Khan of the Pakistan Tehrik-i-Insaf and Yousuf Raza Gilani of the Pakistan People's Party. Therefore, without knowing the linguistic commonalities among different dialects of Punjabi they are out to destroy the language richer than any other language of Pakistan.



This is the language of Baba Farid of Pakpattan, Khwaja Farid of D.G. Khan, Sultan Bahu of Jhang, Peelu of Khushab, Hafiz Barkhudar of Hafizabad, Shah Murad of Chakwal, Mian Muhammad Bukhsh of Jhelum Mirpur, Noshah Ganjbukhsh of Gujrat, Waris Shah of Sheikhpura, Shah Husain of Lahore and Bulleh Shah of Kasur. The political leaders are out to destroy the language of Sufis ... like all of them on their turns helped military dictators destroy the Constitution of 1973 first amended by the creator himself. The more shameful recent amendment was done by Pervez Musharraf with the full support of Altaf's MQM, Shujaat's PML-Q and a group of religious parties who are illiterate in Punjabi/Seraiki.

It is the problem of the class to which the leaders belong. They are not from the people and for the people. They are for their class and its interests. They are not for the language of the people. They are for the languages of power like English and Urdu, therefore, Danish schools for the poor have English as the medium of instruction and Shahbaz Sharif is proud of the fact that after learning English the poor will join the class, which rules the Punjabi speaking "Riyyat". Danish school students from Punjab will be further alienated from Punjabi/Seraiki language spoken by their parents, siblings and people of their street and locality. None of the Punjabi or Seraiki leader is sincere with people and their medium of expression ... the education in Punjab has suppressed the voice of Punjabi people who cannot fully express themselves in their natural medium of expression at any government forum or educational institution.

Punjabi has been totally ignored after invasions of Punjab by the British and imposition of developed Urdu here. Punjabi scholars who were tasked with teaching and promotion of Punjabi miserably failed to understand the crux of the matter. The Punjabi Department was established at the Punjab University after there was a fear that Bengalis might be the next rulers after the election. After many years the Punjab Institute of Language, Art and Culture was established, but both miserably failed to touch the real issue of promotion of a cause.

So far as the Punjabi Department is concerned, it was given to rightwing writers and

teachers because their version of Islam was the only touchstone for everything. They just forgot that Arabic was not an Islamic language before the advent of Islam and it was not Islamic even after the Holy Quran was written in this language and so was the case with all world languages. Consequently, the Punjabi literature created by non-Muslim writers and Sufis or liberals was sidelined by the head of the department who remained in the saddle for almost two decades. The first casualty was Baba Nanak, a great poet and founder of Sikh religion. It was Shahbaz Malik who did not let in the literature produced by the non-Muslim and even liberals like Ustad Daman etc. In Zia's regime, he did 'pen jihad' against those who were not supporters of 'Ziaee Islam'. He was accused of ignoring the Multani or the Lehnda dialect and writers of those areas. Dr Shahbaz declared that language or dialect spoken in Lahore, Gujranwala, Kasur, Sheikhupura, Gujrat and Sialkot etc. was 'standard Punjabi' and he in his book "Punjabi Lisaniat" counted 57 representative writers of the standard dialect and none of them belonged to south Punjab. Shahbaz's guru, Gen Zia, secretly got Seraiki recognised as a separate language when the head of the Punjabi Department was excluding it from the boundaries of Punjab.

Seraiki literature was not encouraged to be taught at the MA level and the magazine of the department never published research writings about the literature produced in south Punjab since the first versification of HeerRanjha by Jhang poet Damodar Das. Incidentally, the centuries old style of mixing shades of all dialects in verse was acceptable to the department, but any new effort to do the same amalgamation in prose was not only discouraged but whoever did it was condemned by Shahbaz Malik in writing. He did his best to cause heart-burning to writers and intellectuals from the south when non-Muslim writers were already banned.

With the change of the head of the department a comparatively enthusiastic scholar Dr Ismat Ullah Zahid was welcomed and now after a very long time one sees no change in the Punjabi Department ... nothing has been done to bring closer the dialects, particularly Multani/Seraiki, through teachings and magazine Khoj. During this period, distance between the south and the centre increased and the same was the attitude about the literature created by non-Muslims, including Baba Nanak who was not welcomed. One can see more than required number of articles on Persian or Urdu writers in 'Khoj' but not on those who bring different creative Punjabi fields closer to each other. Baba Nanak's personality inspired many of his followers to write about different aspects of his life, thoughts and travels. Some of those writings are in verse, some in prose and some in both verse and prose in Punjabi and these writings are great literary assets. A doctoral thesis written by Muhammad Saleem has been approved by the university. The researcher did his job under the Punjabi Department and his chapter about the prose of Janamsakhis (biographies of Baba Nanak) should have been accommodated in department's magazine Khoj, but surprisingly it appeared in Oriental Colleges magazine. This may be a surprising news that the prose contemporary to Shah Husain's poetry and language is found in Pratan Janamsakhi written in 1558. There is another Janamsakhi in which traces of Potohari dialect are found. All these findings could have been used by the Punjabi Department to encourage prose, which would have been of same sort of mixture as we witnesses in Punjabi poetry from Baba Nanak and Shah Husain to Khwaja Farid and Ahmad Rahi. But in spite of longer stay of the two heads of the department the doors could not be fully opened to western dialects of Punjabi and the contribution of the non-Muslims to Punjabi literature. Same is the attitude of the Punjab Institute of Language, Art and Culture toward the publications. That needs a separate piece.